

Zanta, enshrined

With his new graphic novel, cartoonist Jason Kieffer chronicles the tragedy of a missing Toronto eccentric

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Last seen in 2008 in Yorkville, Toronto street performer Zanta (official name David Zancai) has been arrested several times and banned from the downtown core and the TTC. His crime? Doing pushups and flexing his arm muscles, shirtless and in a Santa hat, around the city.

The city is little too quiet without Zanta, and Toronto-based cartoonist Jason Kieffer is trying to summon his memory once again with his graphic novel *Zanta: The Living Legend*, released on October 18.

Kieffer followed the spastic street performer around the city for three years as he wrote his graphic novel, a compilation of illustrated interviews.

In New York City, you have the Naked Cowboy. Here, we have Zanta

Jason Kieffer, Toronto cartoonist

Zancai tells the story of how he injured his back in April 2000 at his contracting job. In 2003, he became the character of Zanta, approaching people on the street (sometimes obnoxiously) and making antics. His mantra, unlike Santa, is to "reward the naughty." He describes his gradual banishment from certain parts of Toronto, and his eventual expulsion from the downtown core.

The story of an artist banished from the city needs to be told, says Kieffer.

"In New York City, you have the Naked Cowboy. Here, we have Zanta," he says. "But now we don't have Zanta because Toronto is a really square city. The city needs to grow up."

His fascination with eccentric community members is enduring. His first book, *The Rabble of Downtown Toronto*, profiles 40 street people, including Zanta. Many are mentally ill, some are homeless, and others are hooked on drugs.

Since his first book, Kieffer says his drawing style has changed, calling the black and white ink panels "muddy, chunky, and claustrophobic," with "way too much detail in the background."

"I definitely won't draw like that

again," he says. "I made a promise to myself that I won't draw backgrounds again."

Kieffer admits the new style makes the graphic novel harder to read, and that it wasn't easy making the story clear and interesting to the average reader.

Another new element in his style, Kieffer says his decision to scrap the splashes of red he used to add to his black and white panels, and to stick to just black ink, was directly influenced by Chester Brown, a Toronto-based cartoonist and friend, famous for his clean, black and white ink drawings and relaxed pen strokes.

While the book consists of raw transcriptions of interviews with Zanta, including a word-for-word account of Zanta's interview with *Molar Radio*, Zanta's character speaks for itself.

The novel paints a vivid picture of the street performer, including his abrupt, rolling growl, typical expressions like, "Yes yes yes!" and his obnoxious hunger for attention.

Zanta's thirst for publicity was a red flag at first, says Kieffer. In the first stages of the project, he himself questioned whether he was writing a story about an artist, or disseminating a free advertisement.

"I thought I was just kind of doing it for him, and he would say, 'Oh look, I got a book about me,'" says Kieffer. "It felt a little superficial."

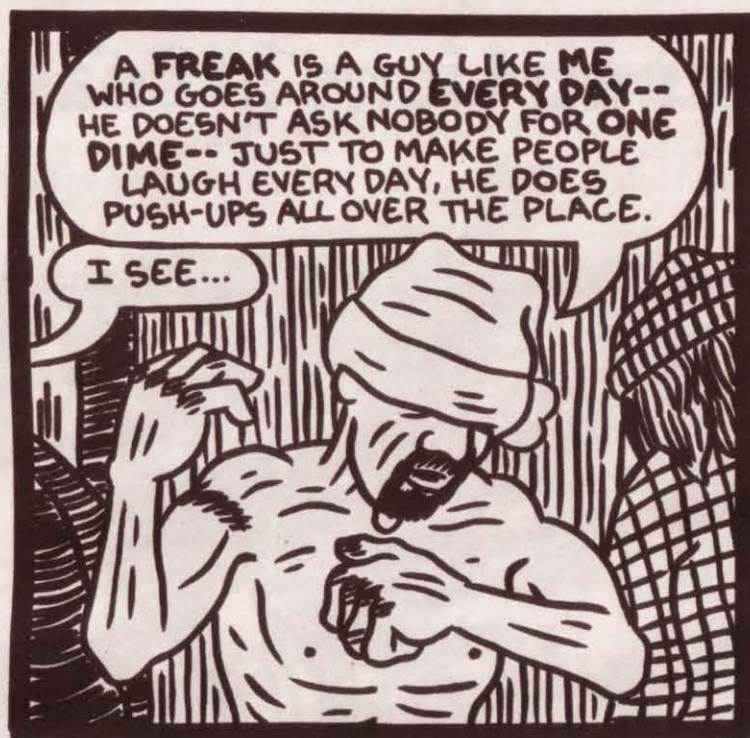
Eventually, he says, he overcame the doubt and realized he was doing it from the heart, but not necessarily for himself.

"I'm doing it for my friends and my city," he says. "When I write a comic, I think about how my friends are going to react to it."

Some of those friends include a cartoonist who goes by the pen name Seth, from Clinton, Ontario, and Brown, who is quoted praising the novel on the back cover, and was present at the book launch at the Central October 18.

One of his more interesting style points, lines and bars appear everywhere in the background of the panels. Kieffer says this was a conscious decision; Zanta is constantly trapped wherever he goes, taken down by the police every time he slips into character.

"I'm trying to show someone who was crushed by the system," says Kieffer. "[Zanta] had something he wanted to do, and then the system stopped it. And then,



This panel from *Zanta: The Living Legend* exemplifies Kieffer's "muddy, chunky, claustrophobic" style.



Jason Kieffer signs his books at Canzine 2012.

you start to realize you don't live in a free country. He tested the limit, and you see what the limit is."

With hardly any preferred reading and no clear stance on Zanta, the book ends with a handful of testimonials from people off the street offering their opinions on Zanta. Some say his quirks add colour to Toronto's culture, while others curse at him. Kieffer isn't worried their testimonials will form the novel's

stance on Zanta.

"I was trying to make people look bad," admits Kieffer.

With his book, Kieffer hopes he can bring closure to Zanta's fall as an artist.

Zanta now lives with his mother in Etobicoke, unable to go anywhere in character.

"He seems okay, but not happy," says Kieffer.

"He wants to do Zanta. To me, he should be allowed to do Zanta."